

Our Salvation and the Lord as Our Savior

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take the spirit of Your holiness from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with Your generous spirit.”

~ Psalm 51:10-12

Sunday after Sunday here in church we pray to the Lord for salvation and to Him in particular as our “Savior.” We sing songs and say recitations about this, and often hear ministers talk about it. Readings from the Word, including our doctrines, focus on it. But if you really think about it, you’ll realize that we hardly ever use the word, salvation in our ordinary speech. Why is that?

Could it be that we’re just so comfortable in our middle-class lives that we feel no need for salvation? Is it because we’re so deeply affected by our own sense of responsibility for what happens to us that it feels foolish to expect someone else to save us? Or is it because we really don’t believe the Lord has much to do with it: He just lays out the laws of order and it’s up to us to work within those laws or suffer the consequences?

What IS salvation, anyway? And why is it such a BIG DEAL in our worship services? Really... we know it’s big in other Christian churches, but what does it mean to US?

Perhaps our understanding of salvation is so focused on the life after death that we feel it isn’t *relevant* to our lives here on earth. After all, unlike other Christians we can’t say at any given time whether we’ve been saved or not; we know it’s a process that can take a lifetime, and most of us just hope that when all is said and done the Lord will accept us into some degree of heaven.

But wait. Salvation really is not that far off or mysterious. In the end the word simply means good health or well-being! So if you’re lost in a storm at sea you need someone to save you. If you’re trapped inside a wrecked car in a traffic pile-up you need someone to save you. If you’ve fallen into a pit or been taken captive by terrorists you need someone or some thing to save you. You need to be rescued and restored to a good, stable, healthy situation.

Now this is important: note the word, restore, in the passage from Psalm 51. If salvation only applies to the life after death, and is something we can only strive for and never achieve in this life, why the word, restore? And why all the other references to being clean and well in this world with the Lord’s help?

Of course the Psalmist, David, is talking about natural salvation, but spiritual salvation isn’t much different. It’s not something out of sight or out of our control or something we can only hope for in some future time or state. It’s freedom from a state of grief, pain or struggle, and like all such freedom it brings with it great relief, a joyful state of appreciation of what is good and true in our lives from the Lord. The only real challenge for us is that for the most part it’s much more difficult for us to *recognize* and *acknowledge* the spiritual crisis from which we need relief than it is to recognize and acknowledge the natural one. You see, we like our own ideas, even

when they get us into trouble, and we feel comfortable with our own loves even when they may be hurtful to ourselves or others. So we tend not to notice that they are the source of the problems we experience, and not realize we need to be rescued, or saved.

To put it in graphic terms, a person who lives in a smelly environment for a long time tends to get used to the smell and not notice it anymore. Still, if the smell is toxic it can kill you. And that's a serious problem.

So we need some objective criteria to determine our true spiritual state. And we need to consider those criteria carefully to determine how serious our problems are. This is why we have all the teachings in the church about the specific steps required in the process of regeneration: - first we go to the Word to learn what is right and good. Then we examine ourselves – do a serious inventory of our real thoughts and feelings to see where we fall short of the ideal, not to beat up on ourselves but to *own up* and take responsibility for what is really there. The next step is to recognize that we can't fight against ourselves, so we need help to deal with the shortcomings we have found. And since the Lord is the only one who can truly strengthen us for this work we know that we need to turn to Him in prayer and commitment to make things right. Finally we need to start doing things differently. We'll never get anywhere, even when we ask for help, if we keep on doing the same old things expecting a different outcome.

As an illustration of the challenge before us consider the teaching in Divine Providence #83: –

“Man's first state, which is a state of condemnation, everyone has by inheritance from his parents; for a person is thereby born into the love of self and the love of the world, and from these as wellsprings, into evils of every kind. He is led by the delights of these loves, *and these delights prevent him from knowing that he is in evils, for every delight of love is felt as good.* Therefore, unless a person is regenerated, he knows no other than that to love himself and the world above all things is goodness itself; and that to rule over all, and to possess the wealth of all others, is the highest good. Moreover, this is the source of all evil; for a person regards no one but himself from love; and if he regards another from love, it is as a devil regards a devil, and as a thief regards a thief, when they act in common.”

DP #101:2 adds,

“[T]hose who give no thought to the evils in themselves, that is, who do not examine themselves and afterwards refrain from evils, cannot but be ignorant of what evil is and then love it from its delight. *For he who does not know evil loves it, and he who neglects to think about it is continually in it.* He is like a blind man who does not see, for it is thought that sees good and evil as the eye sees what is beautiful and what is ugly. He is in evil who thinks and wills it, as well as he who believes that evil does not appear before God, and that if it does appear it is forgiven; for thus he thinks that he is without evil.”

Now of course the vital compensating truth that the heavenly doctrines also teach us is that no one is ever allowed to enter into life without sufficient good and truth from the Lord to balance the horrible influences of our hereditary nature. Otherwise we would have no freedom, and no

chance to experience a heavenly life. In effect we could not be saved. We would not be *worth* saving unless our character were so fundamentally changed that we would lose our identity.

But let's consider some other examples. Take a person with diabetes, clogged arteries or even cancer. These are all hidden but deadly diseases. You might even say that unless something like this is discovered and treated in a person, the one who has it is literally condemned. But if it IS discovered and treated, assuming the rest of the body is healthy, that person may be saved.

Again, we're talking about natural life here, but there is a perfect parallel in spiritual life. Unless we discover and treat the deadly sickness of selfish and worldly loves we cannot be saved: we cannot have healthy spiritual lives. Yes, we can go a long time without overtly suffering, but sooner or later it will catch up to us and we will pay with our lives.

Even so, let's be honest, the idea of calling anyone our savior feels a little odd. Most of us wouldn't even think of calling the surgeon who saves our lives a "savior." More likely we would think of him as a highly trained expert, or specialist, who is able to take advantage of medical research and technology to interrupt a process of destruction or deterioration. We would of course brace ourselves to trust his judgment and be thankful to him for his work, but we wouldn't call him a savior. It just feels like such a foreign, old fashioned word.

But the truth is, if the surgeon saves your life he is a savior – literally speaking. And so the Lord, who is the ONLY one who truly knows how to deal with the issues affecting us on a deeper level, is or can be our Savior. In fact, He knows us from the inside out, He knows how dangerous our condition is, and He knows exactly what we need. All He asks is that we pay attention and come to Him for treatment.

So now let's turn to that treatment. First, you will recall in the Christmas story that it says of the Lord, "You shall call His name Jesus, *for He will save His people from their sins*" (Matt 1:21). He may not save us from the natural harm that is inflicted by others whose freedom to harm is essential to their spiritual lives, but if we co-operate He will save us from our sins – our own sins. This does not mean that He can take away all the consequences of the bad decisions we have made, but He can help us accept those consequences in humility and show us His love regardless. Intellectually this may not seem very helpful, but emotionally it's like being lifted out of a pit. *Somebody cares!* *Somebody* has the capacity to love us despite the miserable things we've experienced or done.

To be specific, the name, Jesus, actually refers to the Lord's love. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew, Joshua, which means a hero, or... savior. Perhaps one reason we don't feel as comfortable with that name as we do with the title, Lord, is that we have in this rather intellectual church a hard time coming to grips with His love. Of course it has a lot to do with old church misconceptions about Jesus, too, but think about it: doesn't the phrase, "Jesus loves you," or "Jesus saves" sound a little trite? And yet it's true! Our doctrines make the point repeatedly that we are not saved by truth; we are saved by love, and the truth that Jesus teaches is simply a means of introducing us to His spiritual love.

Still, and we all know this, it's not love alone that saves us, any more than it is faith alone. Think about all the miracles of healing Jesus did in the Gospel stories. The forgiveness that He offered

in connection with this healing was very often followed by a call to repentance or to “go and sin no more.” This is because no change imposed from outside can really alter the way we are inside. What’s more, we can’t really receive His love, which means changing our own loves, by any act of our will; since our loves reside in our will this would be a contradiction. But what we CAN do by an act of *intellectual* commitment is to accept the teachings He has given us and live according to them. We can compel ourselves to live according to His healing prescription (whether we like it or not) and so get the benefits of the cure – benefits that include the genuine delight of doing what is good for its own sake, without thought of reward, and a real aversion to anything that might offend the Lord or the good in another person (see AC 9449).

As was illustrated in the children’s talk, this co-operation with the Lord can be likened to the determination to grab onto a rope that may be thrown to someone who is drowning or who has fallen down a cliff. The Lord through His teachings throws us the rope, but unless we take hold of it we can’t be rescued... or saved. It’s the same with a doctor’s prescription. It’s all very nice to have faith in the doctor when we go to him with some illness or complaint. But if we think he’s going to make us well by simply writing a prescription we have another think coming. We have to FILL the prescription and then TAKE it. Or to use the analogy of someone who wants to excel in sports: it’s no good just believing you can do it, or that the Lord will give you the power. You have to practice, practice, and practice some more, not to mention do all the exercises that strengthen your body for that skill.

But think about the analogy. WHEN you do this work you get the benefits. The Lord doesn’t make you wait until you die and go to heaven to experience the joy of this achievement. You *can* get well. You *can* get healthy. You *can* experience the joy of His salvation. He *can* restore to you the joy and gladness of spiritual safety and well-being. This is critical.

Many of us have never had to be rescued – saved – from a tragic, life-threatening natural crisis, so it is hard for us to imagine the relief, the joy, the peace, and the profound gratitude that such a person may feel. But when you talk with someone who has been there you know that this joy and relief is real. Again, we may not be *aware* of the evils that threaten our *inner* life, but if we are willing to learn about them, see them for what they are, acknowledge them and get help from the Lord to overcome them, we, too, can experience the joy of salvation, the delight of freedom from the fear, the falsity, the selfishness and the aggravation that drag us down and make our spiritual lives so hard. This is not something remote and intangible, reserved for another life; *in that case it would not be real*. At the same time it is not perfection; we cannot expect perfection even in the next life! But if we can learn about and inwardly *change one thing at a time* by taking hold of the Lord’s life-line in one situation after another *we can be saved*. We can be healthy. We can be well. And we can really bask in the blessings of a heavenly life, little by little, day by day, in this world, *right now*.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 14:22-33
Children’s talk on being saved by the Lord

Psalms 51:1-15
True Christian Religion #579:1-2 & 580:3